DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 040 429

CG 005 436

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TITLE	Guilt Feelings and Mental Health.
INSTITUTION	American Personnel and Guidance Association, Washington, D.C.; Illinois Univ., Urbana.
PUB DATE	Mar 70
NOTE	7p.; Paper presented at the American Personnel and Guidance Association Convention, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 22-26, 1970
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.45
DESCRIPTORS	*Behavior, Individual Development, *Individual Needs, Maladjustment, *Mental Health, Mental Illness, *Personal Adjustment, Psychological Needs, Self Actualization, *Self Concept

ABSTRACT

After initially defining both mental health and guilt feelings, the author examined their relationship, primarily from the perspective of the crippling effects of unwarranted feelings of guilt. Admitting the varied pressures of modern society, he nevertheless believes it is the individual's fault when he fails to glean as much from lif e as he deserves, and it is his responsibility to do something about it. The rather innocuous events and happenings which gradually but surely erode our feelings of confidence and self-worth and make people the way they are, are considered: (1) the home; (2) churches; (3) schools; (4) marriage; (5) occupations; and (6) advertising. All are offenders against mental health and the sources of unfounded guilt feelings. The paper concludes with a brief listing of what people can do about this major mental health problem. Suggestions include: (1) deciding that one has control over his behavior; (2) accepting oneself as less than perfect; (3) having fun; (4) developing a mutual confidential relationship with someone; and (5) setting realistic personal goals. (TL)

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GUILT FEELINGS AND MENTAL HEALTH*

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I would like to discuss mental health and its relationship to guilt feelings. Perhaps the best way to do this would be to first define the terms. However, when I attempt to define mental health I feel somewhat like the guy who inherited a harem, I know what to do, I just have trouble in deciding where to begin. Which reminds me of the Irishman who asked the Frenchman, "Why do you Frenchmen always kiss a lady on the hand," and the Frenchman replied, "Well, one has to begin somewhere."

Mental health may be defined simply as one's feelings about himself and his environment or we could state it in more sophisticated terms as "a relatively enduring state wherein the person is well adjusted, has a zest for living, and is attaining self-actualization for self-realization. It is a positive state, not mere absence of mental disorder" (English and English, 1958). Guilt is a feeling which not only have most of us suffered countless times but also a feeling which we have undoubtedly caused others to suffer numerous times. It may be defined as an uneasy feeling arising from a real or imagined violation of some moral, ethical or legal code. Many times we deserve to feel guilty, and these feelings of remorse may inhibit us from doing things we should not do, and in such cases are valuable. After all, I am not advocating a society of psychopaths. However, many of our guilt feelings are unfounded and prohibit us from living as rich and a productive life as we are capable. I am not advocating that we do away with guilt in its entirety, but believe that it is time to take a closer look at some of the crippling effects of unwarranted feelings of guilt.

It would appear that in our modern society with our unbelievably high standards of living that we should all be living in a state of bliss. Just think of all of our conveniences, things which would have been considered luxuries a few short years ago, and a few years before that they would have been considered dreams or delusions. We do not worry about getting enough food, rather the problem for most of us is getting too much. The variety is as prevalent as is the quantity. Who worries about having enough clothing to keep the body warm and concealed? The concern is again the opposite, keeping in style and making certain that the proper amount of the body is discreetly revealed. Obviously, when we look around at mini-skirts, micro-minis, bikinis, see-throughs, etc., we must conclude that discretion is a personal and highly variable value. We tend to have automatic heat, refrigeration, ventilation, etc., in our homes, cars, and places of employment. In fact, the typical middle-class individual lives better than did kings of a century or so ago.

In spite of this we still have individuals experiencing "nervous breakdowns," premature heart attacks, headaches, impotence, hemorrhoids, ulcers, etc. Our high standard of living seems to be a mixed blessing and there are those who would say that it is not a blessing at all, that the pressures created in obtaining this standard of living result in more anxiety and concern than the comfort and satisfaction derived.

*Paper presented at APGA Convention, March 1970, New Orleans, Louisiana

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Rather than debate this issue, I would rather say that I believe that it is possible to enjoy a high standard of living without going around engaging in self-recriminations and feeling guilty for the privilege of living so well. If it is possible then why do not more of us derive more enjoyment from our lot in life. Who among us has not made the statement that "If I had these things, or if I made a certain amount of money, I would be happy." And how many of us have attained or exceeded those goals, but instead of enjoying ourselves we have merely set higher goals with the same promise to ourselves that, as soon as we reach them, we surely will relax more and find pleasure in life. Admittedly the higher cost of living and the escalation of living standards have taken their toll, but when we are honest with ourselves we have to admit that these are largely rationalizations, rather than the real reasons why we are not getting as much from life as we want.

If we admit this and are somewhat truthful with ourselves, then we have to admit that, at least part of the fault lies within us. It also follows that if the fault lies within us, it is partly at least our responsibility to do something about it. Perhaps it would be helpful to take a look at how we got this way. Were we born feeling guilty or did we learn this attitude? It is my opinion that most, if not all, of these attitudes have been learned by us, usually by imperceptible degrees, so subtle and insidious that we tend to think that we were predestined to be certain kinds of persons and are virtually powerless to do anything about it.

However, if as I indicated earlier that we were not born but were made this way, how were we made this way? What monstrous forces shaped and warped our lives in this manner? If only we could pinpoint the culprit, then we could marshal an all-out offensive and destroy once and for all this plague of mankind. Unfortunately, it is not quite this simple; there is no one single cause but a series of rather innocuous events and happenings which gradually but surely erode our feelings of confidence and self-worth and make us the way we are.

What are these things? Obviously, in most cases it cannot be our homes, churches, schools, friends, relatives, Boy Scouts, Little League, etc., because as we all know these are benevolent institutions and/or persons who spend enormous amounts of time, energy, and money to help us. Just for kicks, though, let us take a little closer look at some of these things.

The first we mentioned was the home. Surely we are not suggesting that our parents did not love us. Of course they loved us, just like we as parents love our own children, that is, on condition that they behave in certain ways. Our love, or at least our approval is almost in direct proportion to the congruence of our children's behavior with our own standards. Children learn that their behavior which does not fit the parentally prescribed patterns is subject to disapproval. Many of these conditions, some necessarily so, are frequently beyond the comprehension of our children. They may not understand why we disapprove, but they are fully conscious of our disapproval. We strive to make our homes beautiful and interesting places to live, but tend to punish our children who try to explore the attractive and inviting objects. We want our children to be bright, or at least to be brighter than the neighbors' and relatives' children, and heaven help the child who is not brighter than the in-law's kids. Not only do we want our children to be bright but we want them to be physically attractive, socially popular, probably athletic, well behaved, but not too well behaved, especially if they are males. We want our sons to be civilized to the point that we can tolerate them at home and that they steer clear of law

enforcement officers on the outside. However, if they become too docile we begin to wonder about them, because as fathers, we know that real he-men beget real he-boys and if our sons are too well mannered, we fear that this is a reflection on our masculinity, an area that most men have probably had some doubts at some time. This is a problem that is difficult for most of us to resolve, and it is in large measure due to our own failure of resolution that makes it so difficult for us to explain to our sons. We are taught that real men do not disclose themselves, rather they keep their emotions and feelings bottled up inside. This not only requires a terrific amount of energy which dilutes our efforts expended on worthwhile pursuits but can make us physically ill and shorten our life span. What a price to pay for a false sense of manhood.

We become what we are through heredity and environment. As parents, we do not pass on the right genes and we may not provide an appropriate model for our children to become all that we want them to become. We expect them to overcome both heredity and environment, something that few of us have been able to do, and when our children fail to do so, in spite of their best efforts, we usually succeed in making them guilty and inferior for not doing so.

Churches are a popular scapegoat today and I hate to join the bandwagon but I fear that they are not spotless. They also talk about love and understanding but it, like parental love, is conditional. Individuals are invited to join churches and then exhorted to perform certain tasks, frequently before the person is spiritually ready to assume that duty. He then faces another conflict, do something which he is unready to do or refuse to do it. Either way he is likey to lose. If he forges ahead in unfamiliar situations he may suffer much anxiety, and if he does not accept these tasks he may begin to wonder about his real commitment to his church. Or as Jourard (1964) has put it, "Impossible concepts of how man ought to be--which, sadly enough are often handed down from the pulpit--make man so ashamed of his true being that he feels obliged to seem different, if for no other reason than to protect his job" (p. 5). Where is his satisfaction coming from? He may have joined the church to try to change his way of living and reduce some of his anxiety, but now finds that religion increases rather than decreases his anxiety. Some churches have what I consider sadistic ministers. I believe they delight in making their members squirm, but perhaps this is a rationalization on my part since I have several things to squirm about. I agree that there is probably no congregation in our country which is doing all that it could for the betterment of mankind but I believe that praise, reward, and positive reinforcement for the good things which they are doing would produce better results than negative criticism for not doing more. I would like to add that I believe churches are becoming more enlightened in this regard.

Schools are probably among the greatest offenders against mental health that we have. This is true from nursery school through graduate school. Of course, now in graduate school our students have had a minimum of 16 years of poor educational experience so you cannot realistically expect me, as a professor, to do much to counteract all that. This is, or course, just an excuse on my part. If you talk to the undergraduate school they blame the high school, the high school blames the junior high, the junior high blames the elementary school, and the elementary school blames the nursery school, that is, if the child attended nursery school, and if he did not, then the parent is blamed for not sending him, and the nursery school blames the parents and, of course, all parents know it is either society's fault or a result of the bad blood from the other side of the family. We are always looking for someone else to blame. In our

schools we spend a lot of time talking about providing for individual differences but actually not much is done about it. This is not a wholesale indictment against teachers; actually I believe that we get a bargain in education considering what we have invested in it. We just have unrealistic expectations, but this is not to say that our schools should not be improved but that if we expect any appreciable improvement not only will our investment have to be increased but the attitudes of parents, school boards, administrators, college professors, teachers, and society as a whole will have to be changed. Our grading systems, our marking systems, our methods of instruction, our lack of concern for the physical and psychological health of students will have to be altered radically. We should stop focusing on how well our students treat subject matter but look at the effects that the subject matter has on our students (Melby, 1966). Too few of our students experience any joy in learning; to them it is a chore to accomplish with as little pain as possible. This even carries over into graduate school where students when required to write a paper or do a project, frequently feel that they are doing it for the professor and not for what they can learn from it. Again among supposedly mature graduate students, grades are of the utmost importance to them. For many, it is infinitely more important to them to get a high mark than it is for them to learn significant materials. We choose prestigious colleges so we can brag about our alma mater but expect or even demand concessions from the school to allow us to graduate.

When criticizing marking systems to graduate classes there are usually a few vociferous students, also teachers, or potential teachers, who maintain that grades must be distributed along the normal curve, that so many students should make low or failing marks to motivate the class toward achievement. After listening patiently to this for a while I respond with, "You know, I believe that you are right, you've convinced me. Since I agree with you I believe that I will initiate your policy to improve the learning and achievement in this class." Then the mood changes. I hear, in effect, that it is great to do this to elementary, high school, and college students but not to graduate students, which translated means that it is desirable to crush younger students by telling them that they are inferior or failures but graduate students should be spared. We do not seem to object to evaluating others but we hate for others to evaluate us, especially if we fear that it may be negative.

We tend to be other directed, instead of self-directed, i.e., we attach too much significance to what others will think of us and not enough to our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. This tendency to misrepresent ourselves to others to make us more acceptable has been called the marketing personality (Fromm, 1947), the self-alienated individual (Horney, 1950), the other-directed character (Riesman, 1950), and the public self (Jourard, 1958). Jourard (1964) feels that this concealment of the real self is the cause of maladjustment and suffering not only to the neurotic or psychotic but among normal people as well.

Marriage is another area in which many persons suffer guilt feelings. The nonsensical ideas of romantic love to which we are subjected throughout our lives contribute greatly to this. We get the idea that marriage is an eternally ecstatic state highlighted with numerous and frequent mutual orgasms. If this state does not materialize immediately we either blame ourselves or our spouse. If we think that it is our fault then we blame ourselves; if we think that it is the fault of our spouse we blame ourselves for having not been able to attract a suitable mate. Either way, we cannot win, and to the casual observer, it might appear that we are a group of masochists who enjoy inflicting pain upon ourselves. I think that, by and large, many of us are

masochists but I do not think that it is by choice, rather it is by trainig and conditioning that we have become this way. Also, I believe that we have more control over our lives than we exert. Certainly many of us find ourselves in unfortunate circumstances, some of which are not entirely of our own making, but rarely, if ever, do we get in a position where we have absolutely no control, or where there are no options open to us. Even when we are powerless to change a situation, we still have the option of changing our perceptions, and after all, this is the crucial aspect of the matter. The situation is usually not nearly as important as the manner in which we perceive it. We can be more of the captain of our fate than many of us will realize, admit, or exercise.

Our occupations carry a certain amount of power and prestige. All jobs have advantages and disadvantages. Again it depends upon our perspective how we view the manner in which we earn a living. We can look at all the jobs which pay more than ours and have advantages which we do not have and become very dissatisfied. Also we can take another vantage point and realize the opportunities afforded us by our jobs and accept the fact that all jobs have some aspects which are distasteful and learn to live with them. After all, as the poet said, if earth were perfect there would be no purpose for heaven. I do not wish to imply that in order to be happy all one has to do is say, "Tomorrow morning I shall become a happy person." It just does not work quite that simply and if you think that it does, you will just add to your guilt feelings. However, one can change his attitudes, but it requires time and effort. For some it may even require the services of a professionally trained psychological counselor. But, and this is crucial, attitudes are learned, they can be unlearned and new ones can be learned to replace them. But the very thought of going to a counselor is threatening to most of us since we have been taught that only the weak are unable to handle their affective life. We feel guilty that we are not able to get as much from life as we should, but asking for help is even more anxiety producing. We feel no guilt about going to a physician when something goes awry with our physical self. Our physical body is a wonderful mechanism, one which will ususally take care of itself if we give it an opportunity. "...it is estimated that except for perhaps 15 percent of all illnesses, rest or change alone will permit the organism to restore itself to the premorbid level of functioning" (Jourard, 1964, p. 147). Schmale (1958) reported that almost all of the hospital patients in his study had suffered from an emotional crisis shortly before they became ill and were hospitalized. Our social and emotional lives have to be learned and developed and, if through faulty teaching and learning they do not develop properly, we should feel no shame in asking for help.

Our sense of worth is often directly related to the value of our physical possessions. We almost automatically relegate the individual who does not amass a certain amount of material goods to the status of a failure. We still believe in the old Horatio Alger myth, that anyone who is honest and works hard will win in the end. This is idiotic thinking and any individual with average intelligence should know better but the idea is still with us and creating guilt feelings in many persons.

Probably no society has ever been as preoccupied with physical attractiveness as is ours. It seems that we all want to accomplish two things, first to look sexy and second to look as much younger than we are as possible. Not only have the cosmetic manufacturers and deodorant producers exploited our weaknesses in these areas, but even, e.g., manufacturers of farming equipment have found that a scantily clad female enhances the sale of farm machinery. We are led to believe

that all body orifices should exude an odor at least as pleasant smelling as honeysuckle. Jourard (1964) stated that, "Prudes who reject their own bodies generally are repelled by body odors, especially those musky smells that accompany sex" (p. 35). It is also intimated that everyone should possess a physique at least equal to a Greek god or goddess. We are even led to believe that persons with a certain color of hair have more fun than the rest of us. This may be true but I know of no research which supports the idea. However, I do know of a few others with X-colored hair who do not do too badly.

If unfounded guilt feelings are a major problem, what then should we do about it? First of all we should recognize the significance and magnitude of the problem. We all pay attention to the daily or weekly casualty count in Vietnam. We should; this is an insult to the decency and intelligence of mankind. However, if we were to compare the number of admissions to our mental institutions with the casualty count, we would be appalled. If there were any way to measure the amount of suffering done and caused by these persons plus the millions of others who do not seek help, the answer would be overwhelming. The problem is too big for the psychiatric and psychological facilities available in this country, so what can you as an individual do? First of all, mental health, like charity, begins at home. Not really at your home but with yourself.

You can decide that you have more control over your behavior. You can rearrange your hierarchy of values and put first things first. You can decide to stand on your own two feet and become more self-directive and not worry so much about what others think. Sure you have made mistakes, who has'nt, but what benefit does it do you or anyone else for you to continually berate and downgrade yourself for your past mistakes? Learn to accept yourself as less than a perfect human being but, at the same time, you are attempting to accept yourself with your shortcomings, allow others around you the same privilege. Anytime that we expect perfection from ourselves or others we are bound to be disappointed. After all, who said that human beings were supposed to be perfect, probably someone who became so dissatisfied with himself that he became a philosopher.

Do not accept all the world's problems as your own personal problems. You do not have the knowledge or facilities to resolve them. Do what you can when the occasion arises but, since you have no choice, trust others to do the best they can. You cannot attend to all of the pressing problems of the world, so do not try. Do not be afraid to get involved but do not try to get so involved in everything that you spread yourself so thin that you are ineffective everywhere.

Have some fun, even if you have to work at it at first. Time spent in pleasant activities may even make you more efficient with the "important" things in life. During these periods of relaxation and recreation you may develop insight and solutions to problems which would never occur to you while actively working on them.

Develop a confidential relationship with someone else. This means that the confidentiality must be mutual. This is difficult for many of us because as Jourard (1964) has stated, "Many of us dread being known because we fear that if we were thus known by others--as intimately as we know our own experience--we would be divorced, fired, imprisoned, shot, or otherwise harmed" (p. 41). However, you may find that it is comforting to know that others share your concerns and anxieties and that it can be quite rewarding to try to help others

resolve their problems. This does not mean that you become an instant psychiatrist but that you listen to others, not only to what they say but the way they say it. You show them respect by trying to understand their feelings, empathizing with them during joy or sorrow, and trying to accept them as individuals who have imperfections but who, like you, are striving to do better.

Finally, do not set unrealistic goals for yourself and do not take yourself so seriously. After all, the sun will rise in the East tomorrow morning regardless of what you do today. And if by chance it doesn't, what you do today is of even less importance.

Stop to think of all of the billions of lives that have preceded you and of the billions that are destined to follow you on this one small planet called Earth, which is, after all, only a tiny speck in the universe. Then ask yourself, just how important was that social error you committed last month? Is it really going to have that much influence on the course of history?

Accept yourself and others, with all the shortcomings and weaknesses inherent in mankind and try to look on the bright side of things. Do not let real or fancied slights and embarrassments upset your life. You do have some control over your behavior and attitudes; exercise it, thereby reducing your guilt feelings and adding to your pleasure in living.

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